

Any Other Way by Iris Violetta

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Summary: Nancy, Steve and Jonathan decide to spend the summer after graduation driving around the country fighting monsters. But they weren't counting on a stowaway...

Any Other Way

It's Nancy's idea originally. She brings it up one January night, their senior year, when the three of them are studying at Steve's house.

"There's this... 'network' of people." She drops her voice to a whisper. "Monster hunters."

Steve and Jonathan glance at each other but let her go on.

"We weren't the first to deal with something like this. And it happens, like, all over the country. A lot of people don't know how to handle it, so they...well, they hire someone." She pauses. "And they pay you."

They don't say anything and Nancy sighs. "Look, don't you feel like we should do something? I do. I think about all the things that could be out there and the people who don't know what to do..."

The boys both nod, looking away from her. They know that feeling well. Steve finally speaks.

"Nance, we can't just drop out of school to go monster hunting."

"I'm not saying we'd go now. I was thinking this summer, after graduation."

"Just the summer?" Jonathan asks.

"Yes. I'm still going to college. You know the best way for me to help with this is to learn more about the science side. But until then...maybe we get our hands dirty."

Steve is the first to agree. "Yeah, let's catch ourselves some monsters."

Jonathan is a bit more hesitant, thinking about his mom and brother. He worries about leaving them and putting himself in danger but...he also thinks about everything that happened to Will and his jaw clenches as he gives a fierce nod. "Let's do it."

A smile spreads over Nancy face. "After graduation."

"It'll be a road trip!" Steve exclaims.

They spend the next few months planning and making calls and gathering supplies and saving money and figuring out a way to tell their parents. But finally the day comes and they're off. They make it to Indianapolis, to the large supply store to stock up on what they still need, when they realize they have a stowaway.

Max has shoved herself into the truck with a backpack and her skateboard and barely looks sheepish when Nancy discovers her. After all that went down with Billy that year and with her crappy home life she just wants to get away from Hawkins for a while so she told her mom she's going to sleep away camp and snuck herself into Steve's car.

Nancy is completely against it and Jonathan worries about keeping her safe. But finally Steve says, "Why not?" He's always had a soft spot for the girl, the little sister he never had.

"It's not like she's gonna do any actual fighting."

The other two finally agree, but threaten to send her on the next bus home if anything happens. Max simply smirks and promises to be good.

Steve usually drives with Max riding shotgun, the latter kicking her feet up and working on a Twizzler. They listen to Jonathan's mixtapes, unless he and Nancy are catching up on sleep in the back. Then Steve turns on pop radio and even though Max rolls her eyes, her head soon starts bobbing to the music. This only lasts until Jonathan wakes up and kicks Steve's seat in protest.

In Georgia they encounter their first monster. They make Max hide in the car as they set off with their supplies. But it's a nasty one and they've been a little out of practice. Jonathan gets knocked out and Nancy's trying to contain the fire and Steve can only get so close to swing the spiked bat and they're all feeling a little panicked when they hear it.

BANG BANG BANG

The monster goes down and Steve and Nancy turn to see Max standing a few yards away, holding the revolver. She'd found where it had been flung down, had reloaded it herself. She gives them a wide stare but her hands stay perfectly still.

Later they wonder to each other how she knew what to do, how easily she was able to reload it, how comfortable she looked with it in her hand. What on earth happened in her past that she was able to do that...

Needless to say, Max is promoted to a full-fledged monster hunter, although they try to keep her out of the way as much as possible.

Steve and Max discover their shared obsession with McDonald's, hitting one up almost every other day until Nancy and Jonathan are begging to eat anywhere else.

"Steven, seriously, ANYWHERE."

Steve lives for vanilla milkshakes and starts getting a second one for Max to dunk her fries in because she was using up too much of his. Her favorite stretches of the drive are spent lazily dipping those salty fries into the cool, sweet milkshake.

In Arkansas, when they're at a gas station after finishing up another job, Max finds a dog, a lean hound mix. He has no collar, but he's friendly, tail wagging as he tries to lick her face. She begs the others to let her take him.

Steve easily acquiesces, as long as they can clean the dog before he gets in the car. Jonathan ends up being the hardest to convince but finally Max's puppy eyes (and Steve's) win him over. For a few bucks, the car wash lets them use the hose and once the dog has been cleaned and dried, they're back on their way, with one more passenger.

Max names him Garbage and it turns out he loves car rides. His

favorite spot is the middle seat in the back, so he can stick his head in between the two front seats for head scratches. He also loves McDonalds but Jonathan insists on getting him some proper dog food. On nights that they stay at motels, he curls up between Max and Nancy on the bed, always alert to any footsteps outside.

They make sure to call home every week.

"Yeah, Mom, camp's all right. Went swimming today. There's a really cute dog here."

"I'll be safe, Mom. I promise. How's Will doing?"

"Mom, I told you, this is something I have to do. Yes, I will be back in time for school. I swear. I love you. Say hi to everyone for me."

"Hey Mom, hey Dad. Guess I got the answering machine again. Don't worry, I'm still alive."

Max loves picking out postcards in the gas stations to send home to her friends. El usually gets pink ones, Will the scenic landscapes, and Mike the landmarks. She spends the most time trying to find the dumbest postcards for Dustin and Lucas, like a cow's face or a photo of coins. Those ones are usually addressed to Butthead and Asswipe.

In Nebraska, while practicing skate tricks at a rest stop, Max falls and sprains her wrist. Steve freaks and carries her to the car, Garbage on his heels, before tearing off for the closest hospital. Max sheds a few tears but roughly wipes them away and Steve pretends not to see. He paces the waiting room as they wait for a doctor and he complains to the nurse a minimum of three times about how long it's taking. She's surprisingly patient with him but does say to put the dog back in the car.

It's not until after her wrist is wrapped and iced that Max reminds him they left Jonathan and Nancy back at the rest stop. The latter two aren't pleased when they finally return, but forgive Steve once they see Max's arm. They're just happy she's okay.

There are good times that summer, like Nancy teaching them the constellations as they lie in a field, the night silent besides their voices and the crickets. Jonathan showing her the best way to get the perfect focus with his camera, most of her practice being of Garbage. Steve winning her a stuffed bear at a Fourth of July carnival in South Dakota.

"I think you should name it Steve Bearington."

"What about Jonathan Bears?"

Garbage disappears in Wyoming. One moment he's there and the next he's gone. They don't know if he was hurt by the monster they wrangled or if he got spooked and ran. Steve and Jonathan look all night for him as Max cries in Nancy's arms in the car. The boys return as the sun rises, no dog in hand.

Steve kneels in front of Max. "I'm sorry, kid, but...we couldn't find him. We have to go, they're waiting for us in Boise."

Max spends most of that drive sleeping in the back, tears drying on her cheeks. Nancy strokes her hair and reminds her - better to have loved and lost...

There are bad times too, like the time Nancy and Jonathan get into a fight about a certain job, whether it's safe enough. The time Steve falls asleep at the wheel after a long string of driving nights and they end up in a cornfield. The time in Nevada when a client refuses to pay after a particularly brutal battle, Nancy so tired and angry that she actually pulls her gun on him.

In El Paso they stop at a gas station on the road between jobs. They're all tired; it's August and the driving has seemed long and endless. But Steve misses the smile on Max's face so he insists on giving her a piggyback ride throughout the convenience store, his moves becoming more exaggerated as she giggles. Nancy follows them around, picking up the merchandise they've knocked over, but she's not really upset because she's been missing the sound of that laughter

as well. When they leave they all feel a little invigorated and a singalong commences.

Max rolls the window down as they drive, holding her arm out in the wind and gazing at the fields as they pass. She's never been in more danger than she has this summer. But she's never felt more loved and protected. And she thinks that's a kind of beauty in itself.

When they finally get back to Hawkins at the end of August, the boys (and El) greet her with a gift: a tiny turtle. They read about Garbage in her postcards and wanted to make her feel better. Dustin and Lucas bicker about whose idea it was. El informs her that it was Will's. Max slings her arm around her shoulder and insists that they tell her all about their summer.

"As boring as it was," she says with a wink.

"Well, my mom would really appreciate it if you would stop sending postcards to Asswipe Sinclair..."